

WHAT IS CLAIMED IS:

1. A method of operating a reservation control system for reserving items dispensed by vending machines networked to the reservation control system, comprising:
receiving, from a requesting computer, a reservation request for an item;
determining whether the item is available at a vending machine; and
if the item is available, reserving the item.
2. The method of claim 1, further comprising, if the item is available, transmitting a message indicating that the reservation request has been accepted, whereby the item is reserved for a future pickup.
3. The method of claim 1, wherein the reservation control system is a receiving vending machine.
4. The method of claim 1, wherein the requesting computer is a requesting vending machine.
5. The method of claim 1, wherein receiving a reservation request comprises receiving an item identifier and an item location identifier.
6. The method of claim 1, wherein the reservation request is received from a wireless telephone.
7. The method of claim 1, wherein the vending machine is connected to a network of vending machines.
8. The method of claim 1, wherein determining whether the item is available at the vending machine comprises accessing a product data structure containing a value indicative of a number of the item available at the vending machine, wherein the data structure is periodically updated with information received from the vending machine.
9. The method of claim 1, further comprising, if the item is unavailable, transmitting a message indicating that the reservation request has been rejected.

10. The method of claim 1, further comprising, upon determining that the item has been purchased from the vending machine, removing an associated reservation request record from a reservation data structure.

11. The method of claim 1, wherein reserving the item comprises placing a hold on the item.

12. The method of claim 1, wherein reserving the item the item comprises assigning a confirmation number to the reservation request, wherein the confirmation number is used to retrieve the item from the vending machine at future time.

13. The method of claim 12, further comprising, if the item is available, transmitting to the requesting computer a message containing the confirmation number.

14. The method of claim 1, wherein reserving the item the item comprises storing an item identifier and a vending machine location identifier and assigning a confirmation number to the reservation request.

15. The method of claim 14, further comprising, if the item is available, transmitting a message containing the confirmation number.

16. The method of claim 1, further comprising receiving an electronic input indicative of a selection to retrieve the item at the vending machine.

17. The method of claim 16, further comprising receiving a request at another vending machine to dispense the item, wherein the another vending machine is different from the vending machine.

18. The method of claim 16, further comprising:
receiving a request at another vending machine to dispense the item, wherein the another vending machine is different from the vending machine;
if the item is available at the another vending machine, dispensing the item and updating a data structure to indicate that the item has been dispensed.

19. The method of claim 18, wherein the data structure is resident on at least one of the vending machine and a central vending machine control system networked to the another vending machine.
20. The method of claim 1, further comprising:
calculating a service charge for the item according to a length of time for which the item was reserved; and
charging the service charge to a purchaser of the item.
21. The method of claim 20, wherein the service charge increases with an increasing reservation time.
22. The method of claim 1, further comprising:
receiving a request at the vending machine to dispense the item; and
calculating a service charge for the item according to a length of time for which the item was reserved.
23. The method of claim 22, wherein the service charge increases with an increasing reservation time.
24. The method of claim 23, charging the service charge to a purchaser of the item.
25. A reservation system for reserving items dispensed by vending machines, comprising:
a memory containing a reservation program;
a first network interface to support a first network connection with a client computer issuing a reservation request for a vending machine item;
a second network interface to support a second network connection with at least one vending machine; and
a processor which, when configured by the reservation program, determines an availability of the vending machine item at the at least one vending machine and, if the vending machine item is available, reserves the item.

26. The reservation system of claim 25, wherein the first network interface and the second network interface are the same.

27. The reservation system of claim 25, wherein the processor is further configured to issue a confirmation number to the client computer if the item is available.

28. The reservation system of claim 25, wherein the processor determines the availability of the vending machine item by accessing a reservation data structure contained in the memory and wherein the reservation data structure is periodically updated with information received from the vending machine.

29. The reservation system of claim 25, wherein the reservation system is a vending machine.

30. A signal bearing medium, comprising a reservation program which, when executed by a processor, performs a method for reserving items dispensed by vending machines, the method comprising:

receiving, from a requesting computer, a reservation request for an item;
determining whether the item is available at a vending machine; and
if the item is available, reserving the item.

31. The signal bearing medium of claim 30, further comprising, if the item is available, transmitting a message indicating that the reservation request has been accepted, whereby the item is reserved for a future pickup.

32. The signal bearing medium of claim 30, wherein the requesting computer is a requesting vending machine.

33. The signal bearing medium of claim 30, wherein receiving a reservation request comprises receiving an item identifier and an item location identifier.

34. The signal bearing medium of claim 30, wherein the reservation request is received from a wireless telephone.

35. The signal bearing medium of claim 30, wherein determining whether the item is available at the vending machine comprises accessing a product data structure containing a value indicative of a number of the item available at the vending machine, wherein the data structure is periodically updated with information received from the vending machine.

36. The signal bearing medium of claim 30, further comprising, if the item is unavailable, transmitting a message indicating that the reservation request has been rejected.

37. The signal bearing medium of claim 30, further comprising, upon determining that the item has been purchased from the vending machine, removing an associated reservation request record from a reservation data structure.

38. The signal bearing medium of claim 30, wherein reserving the item comprises assigning a confirmation number to the reservation request, wherein the confirmation number is used to retrieve the item from the vending machine at future time.

39. The signal bearing medium of claim 38, further comprising, if the item is available, transmitting to the requesting computer a message containing the confirmation number.

40. The signal bearing medium of claim 30, wherein reserving the item comprises storing an item identifier and a vending machine location identifier to a reservation data structure and assigning a confirmation number to the reservation request.

41. The signal bearing medium of claim 31, further comprising, if the item is available, transmitting a message containing the confirmation number.